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# **FLASHPOINT**


**CHRISTIE GOLDEN**

Based on the video game  
from Blizzard Entertainment



**GALLERY BOOKS**

**New York London Toronto Sydney New Delhi**

 Gallery Books  
A Division of Simon & Schuster, Inc.  
1230 Avenue of the Americas  
New York, NY 10020

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First Gallery Books hardcover edition November 2012

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Manufactured in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available.

ISBN 978-1-4516-5962-7  
ISBN 978-1-4165-6004-3 (ebook)

*This book is gratefully dedicated to those who have been so supportive of me during a very difficult time. You all are my Raiders.*



# CHAPTER ONE

2504

*"We all got our choices to make."*

Those were the last words Tychus Findlay—criminal, former marine, and traitor—would ever hear from his old friend James Raynor.

Tychus had made his choice first—to betray Jim's trust and friendship by attempting to murder Sarah Kerrigan, the former Queen of Blades, who now sprawled shivering and vulnerable in a red-black cavern inside the planet Char.

Jim had chosen not to let him.

*"I made a deal with the Devil, Jimmy."*

And for that deal, Sarah lay limp and trembling and alive, and Tychus Findlay lay stiffening in the armor that had turned out to be first a prison and then a metal coffin.

Jim lowered his pistol. Smoke still drifted upward from its muzzle, mingling with the steam that curled and coiled at his feet. The bullet meant for Arcturus Mengsk, the man he hated

above all others, had instead ended the life of the man Jim had once called his best friend.

*What have I just done?*

Jim fought back the tidal wave of emotions that threatened to overwhelm him. This was no time for rejoicing that the artifact to restore Kerrigan had worked, for berating his own lack of judgment regarding Tychus, for mourning the giant of a man whose rumbling voice would never again utter either jokes or threats.

They needed to get out of this murky, hellish cavern, off this world, and fast.

With Sarah Kerrigan.

His men moved forward as their commander holstered his weapon, clearly intending to bring Tychus's body with them. Jim barked sharply, "Leave him!"

"Sir?" Cam Fraser asked, confused. "We don't leave no one behind."

"We're leaving *him*. I ain't gonna risk any of your lives for the sake of carrying the corpse of a traitor," Jim snarled. It was a valid argument. But even as he spoke the words, Jim knew it wasn't the only reason for his decision.

He *wanted* to leave Tychus behind. Findlay had cut a deal with Arcturus Mengsk. He would have traded Kerrigan's life for his freedom. Now Sarah Kerrigan lived, and Tychus would rot inside his suit. There was a brutal justice about it that Jim suspected would rack his soul if he thought about it too much. But, perhaps mercifully, there was no time for thinking.

They had come here, to the zerg base world of Char, to do what no doubt seemed like madness: to make the Queen of Blades human again. They had found her deep inside the volcanic, ashy planet. She seemed completely stripped of her zerg-given abilities and appearance. Gone were the bony wings, the scaly skin that had once covered her toned body. But her hair was still—



It looked like it had worked. And “looked like” was close enough for Raynor, for now.

“We need a dropship, Matt,” Raynor said into his comm.

Matt Horner, captain of the battlecruiser *Hyperion*, sounded stunned. “It . . . it worked? That alien thing Valerian had us go find for him . . . it really worked?”

Raynor knelt and, as gently as possible in the giant metal suit, slid his arms beneath Sarah and lifted her. She whimpered, once, and his heart broke.

“Looks like,” he said. He didn’t voice his concern about her to Matt as his gaze was drawn again to what crowned her head.

The long red, silky tresses Raynor had once run his hands through were still only things of memory. This part of the Queen of Blades had not changed; instead of soft tendrils, what looked like a hideous cross between tentacles, sectioned insect legs, and quills adorned her skull. Maybe, like a tail that wasn’t needed anymore, it was just a vestigial relic left behind after the artifact worked its voodoo.

Maybe it wasn’t.

“I . . . really can’t believe it, sir.” Matt was still stuck in astonishment.

“I said we need a dropship, unless we’ve gone to all this trouble to free Sarah only to have her die along with the rest of us, Matt,” Raynor said. He rose. Sarah’s form, naked as any newborn’s, shifted with the gesture, rolling closer to him.

If only he were really holding her in his arms, not just carrying her in his armor, he thought fleetingly. If only he could feel her against him, as he had once, a few years ago, a lifetime ago.

*Sarah . . . I’m gonna keep you safe.*

“Of course, sir,” said Matt, snapping to attention again. “The zerg are going crazy without Kerri—without the Queen of Blades to direct them. Some of them are fleeing, but a whole mess of them are apparently just interested in suicide

runs. It's going to be tough getting something down to you, but we'll do it."

"Attaboy," Raynor said. He headed back toward the entrance, carrying Sarah carefully. "Now listen up: We've got a little complication. Your dropship needs to wait for two groups, not just one. I had to split up my team. My group went to find out what the xel'naga artifact did to Kerrigan, and Lisle and Haynes stayed behind to protect it. Once you've figured out where you're going to land that dropship, they'll bring it with them and meet us there."

There was no way they were leaving the artifact behind. Jim could see it in his mind's eye: sleek and black, slightly longer than a man was tall, with blue luminescent lines that revealed where five separate pieces had come together to create a single astonishing device. Raynor knew that although they had only begun to understand what it was capable of, he would always remember it and be grateful for what it had done for Sarah.

"I'll start analyzing the terrain for the safest place to park one, sir," Matt said.

"You do that." Jim ended the conversation and switched to another channel. They stepped out of the cavern—

—*I killed my best friend and left him to rot in there*—

—into the red glow of what passed for sunlight on Char. It was an ugly and unpredictable world. The surface was rocky and black, or gray with ash, or simply just liquid fire. The atmosphere was survivable without hardskins . . . barely. It was Hell, pure and simple, and a fitting place for the zerg to call their home.

"Jim?" The voice was weak, but it was *hers*. Human. And she knew who he was.

"It's okay; I gotcha." And that was all he needed to say. He walked slowly, carefully, then, feeling her gaze, met her eyes. He did not give her a reassuring smile. His feelings ran too deep for that. He looked at her for a moment, then returned his

attention to the ugly world around him. Words could come later. Right now, he needed to get her to safety.

"Hey, boys," he said into his comm, "it worked. You kept that xel'naga thing safe for me like I asked?"

"Yes, sir!" came Lisle's voice. "Had to fight back a bunch of 'em when it first started, but they've steered clear of it for a while. Was the damnedest thing—critters just started attacking each other."

"And I bet you ain't complaining."

"No, sir, not one damn bit!"

"I'll let you know the rendezvous point as soon as we know ourselves." Jim glanced up at the red sky. He could see that the battle was still raging above the planet; here and there were explosions, appearing as small puffs from this distance. He could even see the tiny shapes of mutalisks closer to the surface. "We—"

Kerrigan's body suddenly spasmed, and she began to cough. Jim swore. He should have thought of this. They still didn't know what, exactly, had happened to Kerrigan—it could be that the transition back to human had weakened her more than they thought.

"Medic!" he called as he placed Kerrigan on the ground, kneeling beside her. Lily Preston hurried up to him, striding swiftly in her medic's hardskin while pulling out a respiratory unit from her pack. She too knelt beside Kerrigan, fastening the unit over the gasping woman's mouth and nose. A thin blanket, featherlight but made of a material known as insulweave that would ensure that the patient's body heat stayed at a steady 37 degrees Celsius, was gently wrapped around Kerrigan. She whimpered softly as her limbs were lifted and tucked in like a doll's, but the coughing and spasming stopped.

Preston peered at Jim. "We don't know what she is anymore, Jim," she said. "I'm treating her like a human, but—"

"She *is* human, dammit!" Jim snapped, insisting on it even though he himself was gripped with a cold fear that Kerrigan

really wasn't. "She has trouble breathing the air just like we do. Her body temperature—"

The ground on which the two knelt suddenly pitched like a wild animal, and there was a huge, reverberating sound that seemed to go on forever. Several other Raiders were knocked clean off their feet. Jim held Sarah close, trying to keep her stable. Out of the corner of his eye he glimpsed a huge red glow, and he whirled to see what had happened.

A gigantic chunk of what had once been a battlecruiser was now nothing more than blazing wreckage, burning sullenly in the crater it had made. Things out of nightmares were swarming all over it. They were zerglings, the smallest package in which zerg hell came. Hydralisks were a maglev train-wreck combination of insects with scythelike arms, snake bodies, teeth that never ended, and neosteel-penetrating spines they fired from their backs. Mutalisks were monsters that brought the ability to fly in atmosphere and in deep space, acidic blood, and parasitic glave wurms into the mix. What the zerglings lacked in size and unique attacks compared to their brothers, they made up for in numbers. Seemingly composed entirely of teeth and claws and carapaces, the zerglings threw themselves on the wreckage, attracted like insects to the brightness and the heat, and screamed horribly as their bodies were burned to a crisp. Jim glanced skyward and shouted, "Brace for impact!" as the rest of the battlecruiser, in fiery chunks as small as a helmet and as large as a house, followed, slamming into the surface of Char like an armored fist into an unprotected face.

Despite Jim's warning and the stability the hardskins provided, the ground trembled so violently that more than one of them fell. Jim hung on tightly to Sarah, swaying and fighting to remain steady out of sheer cussedness.

Many of the remaining zerglings were suddenly silenced, but others continued to scramble and shriek. Any second now

the hideous things, utterly undirected, would no doubt turn and come for Jim and his team. Not because they were bearing away the zerg Queen of Blades, who had once controlled and directed them completely, but simply because the terrans were moving, and thus they were prey.

In his head, Jim suddenly saw the image that had haunted him for four years: the disturbed, broken fantasy of what Sarah's last moments as a human woman had been like.

He heard again her request for aid, heard Arcturus's despicable words: *"Belay that order. We're moving out."* Arcturus Mengsk—he who used people until he had used them up, then threw them away once they were of no more use or had become too dangerous. Jim heard himself screaming, *"What? You're not just gonna leave them?"* The disbelief—it had still been a question then. Jim had still somehow thought he had misunderstood, that Arcturus wasn't really doing what it looked like.

But that ice-hearted bastard had intended to do exactly that. Sarah's voice had come again, a slight tremor of worry in its normally cool tones: *"Uh, boys . . . ? How about that evac?"*

*"Damn you, Arcturus! Don't do this."*

*And you are damned. You are . . .*

*"Commander . . . ?"*

Pause.

*". . . Jim? What the hell's going on up there?"*

And then nothing. Jim had imagined her looking in all directions as they came, endless wave after wave of horror, chittering and shrieking in triumph. And after that? The Queen of Blades, part psionic human but more monstrous zerg, had been born.

He had tormented himself with wondering how she had faced what should have been her death: Firing till her ammunition ran out, then leaping on them? Standing quietly and letting them take her? Attempting to kill herself first?

*I thought they'd killed you. There were times—a lot of 'em—that I wished they had.*

*And now, even with all you've done, even with so many dead—I'm so glad you're alive.*

He heard the sounds of weapons being fired in the distance, and then the inevitable high-pitched chittering and screaming of the zerg. Jim rose and reached for his pistol, taking a huge step so that he stood protectively over Sarah. They would get her only over his dead body—literally. Except he would take the precious second to kill her before they got him. Sarah Kerrigan would never again be their creation.

And today was *not* a good day to die. Not when his life had a chance of restarting after hurtling to a heart-shattering stop four years ago.

Fraser glanced at him quickly, then away as he too took a defensive stance. “I kinda feel sorry for the zerg right now, tackling you, Jim.”

“Me too.”

Jim looked upward, relieved to see that, for now at least, the mutalisks were busying themselves attacking the Dominion vessels in the air, which were better prepared to fight them off. Of more immediate concern to him was the cloud of ashy gray dust stirred up from the enemy's approach. Jim could distinguish the shapes of multijawed, scythe-armed monstrosities slithering on their tail-torsos. He counted four hydralisks. Swallowed by the powdery dust were lumps that had to be several more zerglings racing forward like a pack of wild dogs, only infinitely more lethal and terrifying.

Jim took aim as the cloud drew closer and ordered, “On my mark—fire!”

His soldiers were good. Jim felt sweat trickling into his own eyes and blinked it back, ignoring the sting. He waited until that sweet second, when the attack would have the most effect but not be so late that they would be overrun. In some distant part

of his mind, he lamented that he had become so familiar with how best to slaughter zerg that the timing was almost second nature.

Still they came, crying out for blood and death, crazed with the lack of guidance from their missing queen.

Jim waited.

*"Mark!"* he shouted. The clacking, gleeful screams of triumph and lust to kill changed abruptly into sharp keening sounds as the zerg were blasted to bloody chunks. Pieces of the insectoid horrors flew wildly into the air. A chunk of carapace thumped on Jim's helmet before sliding off. He didn't change his pace. He kept firing, moving the pistol with a steady sweeping motion back and forth, mowing them down as they came. He had never seen independent thought in their actions or movements, but he had often seen intelligence. Kerrigan's intelligence, directing and maneuvering them. Now, he saw only chaos and insanity glinting in their tiny, bright eyes, erratic choppiness in their movements.

He blew off the last one's head. It dropped six paces from him, spewing blood and ichor, twitched, and lay still.

At once Jim knelt beside Sarah. She was curled up in a ball, clutching the blanket about her. Oddly enough, the gesture reassured Jim. It was . . . very human.

"Matt, where is that dropship?" Raynor shouted into his comm.

"Sir, it just launched." Matt's voice was sharp with anxiety. Judging by what remained of the battlecruiser still smoldering nearby, Jim could make a good guess as to what he was dealing with up there. But there was no time for sympathy. They had to get Sarah aboard, and then they had to get the fekk away from this hellhole.

"Tell them I'll double their pay if they get here in five minutes."

"Sir, you haven't paid them in weeks."

"Well, if I'm dead by the time they get here, that ain't gonna change, now, is it?"

Matt's faint chuckle was heartening. "There's truth in that, sir. I'll let them know, but there's no guarantee when they'll get there. Rendezvous coordinates are bearing eight four seven mark eight."

"Good. We're not far from that plateau."

"Sir," said Fraser, "readings indicate that it's crawling with zerg."

"Of course it is," said Jim. "Whole damn *planet* is. We just got to get there and hold them off till the ship comes."

He gathered Kerrigan in his arms. Her eyes opened. They were now back to their normal shade of green, no longer glowing and terrifying. She gave him a small smile, the pale lips of her too-wide mouth curving slightly. Her hand lifted to touch his chest, then fell back limply as her head rolled and her eyes closed, her body exhausted by that simple effort.

Oh yes. He'd hold them off. He'd hold them off forever.

Jim had notified Lisle and Haynes where the dropship would be landing and had to simply hope that the two soldiers would be able to hold off the zerg on their own. The plateau where rescue would come loomed ahead, only a few kilometers and yet a world away. Even as they ran steadily, their hardskins carrying them gracefully and easily, Jim heard a distant, low sound. He was incongruously reminded of the hot summers he had experienced, growing up on Shiloh, of the descent of twilight accompanied by the droning music of insects.

This sound, though, snapped him to full attention. He could see the creatures now, heading toward him and his team. Uncontrolled, they were reacting like the beasts they were, scenting prey and closing in on it. Jim felt a flash of grim humor as he realized that Lisle and Haynes were probably safer than he was this time.



Without Kerrigan to control them, the zerg would likely be less interested in the two humans with the artifact than the four humans without it, simply because Jim's group would provide more food.

"Stand your ground!"

There was a clatter as the soldiers came to a halt, lifted their rifles, and stood ready to attack on his command. Jim could distinguish three separate packs. There was no order to them, no uniform numbers or types, no flanking on one side or the other, no strategy at all. There was only hunger.

*Wait . . .*

"Fire!"

The Raiders butchered the zerg relentlessly. Some of the things stopped dead in their tracks and whirled, turning on their fallen colleagues for sustenance with the same enthusiasm they would have turned on Raynor's Raiders. While Jim held Sarah, the others kept firing, dropping more and more of the wretches, and when at last no attacking zerg remained, only diners and dinners, he gestured to his soldiers to go around the feast. The Raiders ran past while zerglings cannibalized hydralisks. As he left the grotesque sight behind, he suddenly wondered if the zerg would find and devour the body of a man he had once regarded as "friend," cracking open the metal shell of Findlay's armor to get to what was inside. . . .

He recoiled from the image for an instant and then forced himself to harden his heart against it. Tychus was dead. He didn't have to be. He could have still been alive, have still been Jim's friend, if he had turned his back on his "deal with the Devil." If only he had not been about to murder the woman Jim loved. But Tychus had made his choice, and he had to have known going in what Jim would do. He knew Jim better than anybody.

*Tychus. Damn, there was a time when I'd have done anything for you. And when I thought you would've done anything for me. A time when you did give up everything for me.*

A zergling was charging up to him, slaver dripping from its jaws. Without a pack its run was suicidal, but it didn't know that. It just knew it was hungry. Jim cradled Kerrigan close and turned so his back was to the creature, protecting her with his own body. Fraser leveled his rifle and fired a spike right between the thing's gleaming eyes. It kept coming for a stride or two, as if its body required a few seconds to understand that its brain had just been impaled, then it collapsed. Fraser took a bead on a second one, but it was unnecessary. The other zergling came to a halt and began to tear chunks out of its pack mate.

"Behind you!" Jim shouted.

Fraser whirled and dropped two more. The other zerglings chattered excitedly at the banquet Jim and his Raiders had spread out before them. Jim didn't even bother to wrinkle his nose in disgust. He simply held Kerrigan and started, again, to run straight for the rendezvous point.

It would be hypocrisy to condemn the zerg for turning on their own. They, at least, had excuses. Once completely controlled by the Overmind and then by the Queen of Blades, now they were nothing but simpleminded beasts. What excuse did humans have for doing the same thing?

Mengsk had turned on Kerrigan without batting an eye, abandoning her to what he expected would be a horrifically brutal fate. Tychus, at least, seemed to have taken an instant to mourn what he saw as a necessity. "*Damn shame,*" he had muttered.

Before starting to squeeze the trigger.

Before choosing to murder a helpless, traumatized woman right in front of the man who loved her.

*Damn him anyway.*

It was becoming brutally rote: Zerg, one or two or twenty, would come out of nowhere. Jim would shout the orders. His Raiders would fire, and the zerg would fall, sometimes quickly, sometimes not. And when enough were dead, as if there were

some kind of tipping point unknown to the Raiders, the zerg would stop hunting humans and start eating their own kind.

He wondered if his people resented the fact that their leader, who had chosen to put all their lives in jeopardy, stood by, holding Sarah Kerrigan, the former Queen of Blades—the one responsible for the deaths of so very many—while they fought to protect them all. Jim realized with a sick sensation that no matter how well you thought you knew someone, you didn't. You couldn't. Only the protoss could know someone through and through, by linking their minds and essences in the great psychic meeting space they called the Khala. And even some of their own kind, the dark templar, had chosen not to reveal themselves so profoundly.

*I'm flying blind,* Jim thought as he kept running, trying to cover as much ground as he could while jostling Sarah as little as possible. *We all are. Every man, every woman. We're flying blind, and we never really know shit about any other heart or mind but our own.*

"Sir!" cried Fraser. "Look!"

Mortified, Jim realized he had been so lost in his thoughts that he hadn't seen the tiny speck in the sky that was growing larger and larger, its shape becoming clearer until he could see the familiar and welcome curves of the dropship *Fanfare*. It looked more beautiful to Jim than just about any other sight he had ever seen . . . except for the look Sarah had given him as he bore her away.

But as cheers and whoops of delight went up from the weary soldiers, the sound was joined by another—a buzzing, humming noise. Jim swore. The *Fanfare*, like all dropships, had no weapons, and it couldn't land to rescue them until Jim's team cleared the area first.

"Fire at will!" Jim ordered. "Ain't gonna let a few pesky zerg get in our way!"

The soldiers agreed, and they fired on the zerg with even more intensity than they had demonstrated before. Zerg blew apart into pieces, and this time the Raiders didn't spare those that stopped to eat. Jim and his soldiers kept going, winning the prize step by slogging step, spattered in zerg blood and ichor. And finally, blessedly, the *Fanfare* settled on the rocky but mostly flat ground.

The ramp extended and the pilot, Wil Merrick, beckoned furiously. "Hurry! There's a whole slew of them heading this way!"

"Any sign of the second team?"

"None," Merrick said, then his eyes fell on the blanket-wrapped form. "Damn, that her?"

"That's her," Jim said.

"She's in shock," said Preston. She reached to take Jim's precious burden away from him, lifting Sarah as easily as he did thanks to the medic's armor. Jim didn't want to let Sarah go, but she needed what the medics could do for her right now more than what he could do. He handed her over to Preston, feeling a lurch in his heart as he watched the medic carry her inside. Kerrigan was eased into a seat and hooked up to an IV drip and (what looked to Jim) about six thousand other tubes or portable monitors. The words forced themselves out of Jim's mouth, a quiet plea: "Be gentle."

The irony did not escape him; it was a hell of a request to show gentleness to the murderess of billions. But Preston understood, nodding wordlessly as she went about her job of trying to save Kerrigan's life. Sarah gave no sign that she was even peripherally aware of anything.

*Hang on, Sarah. You're tough; you can survive. Don't let it be too late. Not after all this. . . .*

"Damn, sir, we need to get going!" the pilot shouted. "We got another bunch of zerg incoming."

"What kind?"

“We had to evade a whole shitload of mutalisks just to get down here, sir,” Merrick replied. “Once we hit atmosphere, they went after someone else, but sensors indicate there’s a mess of zerglings and hydralisks that seem intent on finishing the job.”

Jim glanced over at Sarah. He desperately wished she could be gone, out of danger, safely in the *Hyperion*’s sick bay, but he couldn’t abandon the men who had risked everything to save her.

“We ain’t leaving my men to be zerg fodder nor that artifact to be destroyed!” Jim snapped. “Keep her as stable as possible. Her survival is paramount. If I give the order for you to take off and get to safety and leave me behind, you do it, do you understand?”

“Perfectly, sir.”

Jim looked again at Sarah, her skin painted an unnatural hue by the artificial lighting, then jumped out of the dropship. The doors closed behind him.

His Raiders joined him, one of them handing Jim a gauss rifle. While he had treasured every moment he had tasted with Sarah in his arms again, Jim was also glad to be hoisting a rifle and tackling an active role in the fight once more.

He could hear the zerg coming now, feel the earth tremble beneath their onslaught. Grinning a little, Raynor lifted his rifle, pointed it at the roiling cloud of gray dust, and began to fire.

